



## WOMEN'S SUPPORT SERVICES

*Domestic Violence  
Intervention  
& Prevention*

### Testimony in Support of

#### HB 7005, AAC Domestic Violence Offender Program Standards and Increased Protections for Victims of Domestic Violence

#### Judiciary Committee

March 16, 2015

Good morning Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and members of the committee. I am Lori Rivenburgh, Executive Director of Women's Support Services in Sharon, CT. Women's Support Services, Inc. (WSS), is a non-profit organization that provides free and confidential services to those affected by domestic violence and abuse in the Connecticut towns of Canaan, Cornwall, Kent, North Canaan, Salisbury and Sharon. We provide crisis intervention and client centered services as well as violence prevention education. These services include a 24-hour confidential hotline, short-term emergency shelter, referral to long-term shelter, individual counseling and safety planning, support groups for women and children, legal advocacy, transportation, information and referral. WSS staff is available to accompany persons to court, assist in obtaining financial assistance, housing, employment, clothing, daycare and other needs. In addition to providing direct services for victims of abuse, WSS is committed to violence prevention education and continues to offer free programs in the schools and communities we serve.

From July 2013 through June 2014, WSS worked with 671 individuals (615 adults and 56 children), responded to 462 crisis contacts (phone calls and walk-ins) and provided 333 individual counseling sessions for persons in our service area. In addition, staff offered 943 counseling and supportive contacts to adults and children. Our community educator and staff were active in the schools and with community groups, reaching 8,063 participants through presentations and public awareness activities and events.

We urge your support of House Bill 7005.

#### HB 7005

Since 1981 Connecticut law has allowed the names and addresses of sexual assault victims to be kept confidential throughout involvement with the criminal justice system (CGS § 54-86d and 54-86e).

This bill proposes extending that same confidentiality to victims of family violence while still ensuring that the information is available to the accused in the same time and manner as such information is available to persons accused of other crimes.

Seeking assistance for family violence can be a very difficult step for a victim to take. They are often afraid about how they or their abuser, who they may still love, might be judged. Many victims do not find the decision to involve the police and criminal justice system in their relationship as an easy one to make.

We have heard from many victims that some of the hesitation to take that step is based on the knowledge that their name in all likelihood will appear in the local media, either through a police blotter or local news reporting.

WSS Testimony in Support of HB 7005 3.16.15

Page 1 of 2

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*Women's Support Services  
is a nonprofit, tax exempt  
organization serving victims  
of domestic violence & abuse  
in the towns of Canaan,  
Cornwall, Kent, North  
Canaan, Salisbury, Sharon  
and surrounding areas.*

This is particularly true in a small community such as the one we serve in the northwest corner of Connecticut. In our area, we have one local newspaper and the police blotter is often the first section locals go to when they pick up the paper. We have had numerous incidents where the publication of victims' names has caused challenges for victims we serve. If the individuals work locally there is often repercussions at work where they become isolated, or are a target of gossip, and people are hesitant to associate with them once they have been in the newspaper. In addition, it hinders their ability to apply for jobs locally as the stigma follows them and influences local business owners' willingness to hire someone who has been in the newspaper. Local landlords are hesitant to rent to victims if they have seen their names in the newspapers. It is also common for those who rent to lose housing once the landlord learns police have been called to the home for a domestic violence related incident. Even though the individuals may be seen as a victim in the newspaper, the shame and disgrace are publicly displayed for the community to see and pass judgment on them. Given that our service area is rural, with few resources, it is common for neighbors to cross paths through daily interactions at the post office or local grocery store. There is little to no anonymity as families interact at school functions, local community events and get to know each other's names due to the frequency of contact. Once details of family violence are published in the newspaper these simple daily interactions can become challenging for victims as they must endure the whispers of gossip, refusal of inclusion in events or social gatherings and it often times, can increase the violence in the home. The person that batters may blame the victim for calling the police or for causing the incident where the police were called. Rather than accepting responsibility for their actions, the person that batters, blames the victims, as do members of her local community, and her home and neighborhood becomes an unsafe and unwelcoming place for her.

It is critical that we extend to victims of family violence the same confidentiality protections available to victims of sexual assault. Victims should not have to make a decision to seek assistance from the police based on a fear that the dynamics of their relationship will be shared with everyone in their local community.

Again, we urge your support of these important measures. Thank you for your consideration.

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